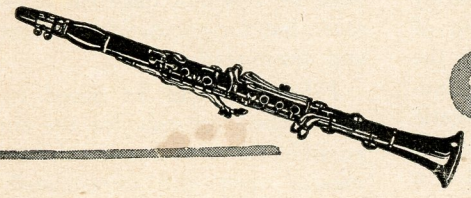
WOODWIND clinic



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Flute Tone and Intonation

Including a Discussion of Vibrato

MUST flutists play sharp? Intonation is so closely allied to tone production that in order to get a clear conception of the problems involved and the means to their solutions, we must consider the two together. How often one meets a student who plays sharp in a *forte* passage and flat when *pianissimo* is required! Usually this is due to the fact that he is at all times maintaining a tight embouchure.

There are two principal ways by which to change the pitch of a tone at a constant dynamic level: first, vary the tightness of the embouchure; second, raise and lower the head with respect to the mouthpiece. Ordinarily the first method is preferred, since in raising and lowering the head there is a marked changed in the quality of the tone. However, there are two occasions when it is necessary to use the second method. First, in making a sharp attack, when the lip does not have time to adjust to the sudden impulse of air, it is necessary to "duck" the head momentarily. Second, at the end of a note which has not been tapered a sudden lifting of the head will prevent it from going flat, or sagging.

In the case of a *crescendo* and *diminuendo* when the pitch would ordinarily rise and fall with no compensation, it is much better to make the required correction by tightening and relaxing the lips. Not only will the quality remain much more constant, but by relaxing the lips while playing *forte* the opening between the lips becomes larger and thus a fuller tone is produced. At the same time the proper pitch is maintained. Lowering the head, on the other hand, tends to close off the flute opening at the very time a large, full sound is most desired. Elementary as it is, this point seems to have been given little emphasis. Also, unless one relaxes the embouchure when playing *forte*, there is the piper to pay in trying to keep the pitch up at the *pianissimo* level.

Tone Production

The flute tone, properly produced, will sound free and open. A free and open tone can be achieved by keeping the lips firm, but not tense, and the throat open at all times. This must be watched particularly at the *piano* level, when there is a decided tendency to close off the air column by tightening the throat, just as in vocal production. Relaxation of the throat becomes increasingly important with the introduction of vibrato.

Volume of sound, also as in vocal production, must be controlled by the diaphragm, in the case of the flute, with the lips opening and closing to keep a good tone quality and to regulate the pitch. It will be found that by keeping the lips comparatively open and relaxed in the *forte* a round, full, mellow sound can be produced, as opposed to the harsh, sharp sound we so often hear. This element of diaphragmatic support should be particularly stressed, not only because it is important in projecting the tone, but also because it helps one remain relaxed and open in the throat and relieves the load on the lips.

The proper angle to blow into or across the mouthpiece can best be discovered by experiment. It must be kept in mind that for the beginner it will be somewhat easier to produce a clear tone by blowing down into the flute, but this tendency must be checked to the extent that the sound should remain open. Naturally the tone must have a certain amount of edge to it to give it resonance and for purposes of projection and general control of the tone. It is essential that

this edge not be produced by blowing down into the flute, thus giving a hard, closed sound, but rather by a proper setting of the lips while blowing across the opening. One way to get this proper setting is to think of spitting something off the lip, at the same time keeping in mind that this is not the correct method of tonguing. In doing this the muscles at each side of the mouth will draw the lips into the proper position for playing.

Tongueless Attack

A means which might be used to achieve more edge and, at the same time, support for and projection of the tone, is the tongueless attack. It is simply an attack begun by a compression of the diaphragm, with no part being played by the tongue. By making a series of repeated attacks of this type in *piano*, each note short, it is possible to clear up a fuzzy tone and increase its resonance. It is best to make each note short, for it is in the original attack of a note that the maximum edge appears, and it is on a short note that it is the most difficult to get a true tone. A series of these attacks on a particular note should end with a long tone; this is both for practice of control and to see if one can maintain the same edge achieved in the attack.

Use of the tongueless attack has two additional advantages. First, it makes the production of a tone independent of the tongue and entirely dependent upon a proper setting of the embouchure. Second, when the tongue is added there is a combination of tongue and diaphragmatic push. Thus a tongued passage is projected to the same degree as that of a slurred, lyrical passage, rather than swallowed into the background, as is so often the case. A good way to practice this particular approach is to start with a tongueless attack and gradually add more and more tongue, at the same time keeping the full sound originally produced.

This diaphragmatic attack, with the addition of a slight bit of tonguing, will be found particularly useful in performing low *staccato* passages. The five tone scale exercises found in the *Grand Exercises Journaliers de Mécanisme*, by *Taffanel-Gaubert*, are excellent for practicing this difficult feature of flute playing.

No discussion of tone would be complete without some mention of *vibrato*, since it is such an important means of coloring the tone. Naturally, a prerequisite for the study of *vibrato* is a clear, open tone—one without any unsteadiness or quivering. This must be true not only for a *mezzo-forte*, but for *piano*, *forte*, *crescendo*, and *diminuendo*.

Vibrato should be based in the diaphragm, not only for the control possible, but also that the throat may remain open and unrestricted. In practicing vibrato it is best to begin slowly, with the impulse quite wide, for maximum control. Then gradually speed up, the vibrato remaining comparatively wide. This could be practiced in groups of from two up to nine at M.M. 60; and also with no particular unit to the beat, for purposes of freedom.

Only after one has gained steady control of the vibrato should he work on narrowing down its width. This may be brought to such a narrow point that the vibrato is barely perceptible. Ordinarily, vibrato will have some five to nine impulses per second, depending on the mood and character of the music being performed. For maximum projection and intensity, such as is called for in the flute solo passage in the last movement of the Brahms First Symphony, a wide, fast vibrato is best, while a comparatively slow, narrow vibrato will give a feeling of placidity. And of course there will be all the variations in between.

Just as in vocal production the vibrato does not remain at a constant speed and width throughout a piece, so must the flutist vary his vibrato to heighten the interest. However, he must remember that the listener should not be particularly conscious of the vibrato. If he is, then probably too much vibrato is being used by the performer.

In teaching tone production and vibrato, there is no good substitute for a demonstration by the teacher. Some students may be able to acquire the proper concept without actually hearing the tone demonstrated, but the great majority find it easier to learn by imitation and comparison.

Sell your old instruments and uniforms. Details on page 51.